

POLICY AND PRACTICE IN CAREER GUIDANCE: AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction

Public policy is not of great intrinsic interest to most career guidance practitioners. What draws them to career guidance work, and what inspires and motivates them, are not policy goals, but a concern for helping people. They are interested in people as individuals, rather than in political ideas. This, arguably, is right and as it should be.

But, of course, public policy is crucial to career guidance work. Most career guidance services in most countries are paid for by governments, whether at national, regional or local level. A few countries, including the UK, have experimented with the possibility of moving towards more market-based models in which individuals (especially adults) pay, but even this is a policy decision. Moves to tilt policy in particular directions – towards market forces or towards combating social exclusion, to take just two examples – can, as the recent history of the Careers Service in the UK shows, have a massive influence on the organisational contexts in which career guidance is carried out, on the individuals to whom it is addressed, and on the forms it takes.

I have been interested and involved in these matters for some time. For this year, though, I have been working on policy issues on a full-time basis, in an international context. I have been based at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in Paris, working on a 14-country Career Guidance Policy Review. I am working there with an Australian, Richard Sweet, who is a permanent member of the OECD Secretariat. What I plan to do this morning is first to talk about the rationale for the review and the form it is taking; second to present some of our initial tentative findings, both general and specific; third to make a few comments on the UK as viewed from the perspective of the review; and finally to place the review in the context of some other current

international developments at the interface between career guidance and public policy.

The OECD review

OECD is an inter-governmental organisation, based in Paris. It currently has 30 member countries, spread across the world. It is often regarded as the rich countries' club, but its recent new members include Mexico and several countries from central and eastern Europe. Much of its work is based in economics, and you are probably most familiar with the organisation through its regular statements, well publicised in the news headlines, about how the UK economy is faring within the context of the global economy. But its work covers all areas of public policy, including areas like education, training and employment.

Most of OECD's activities are concerned with benchmarking, enabling countries to see how well they are doing in relation to other comparable countries, and sharing good practice – enabling countries to promote their successes and to learn from practices elsewhere. A prominent example in the field of education in the last year has been the PISA study, assessing student performance in relation to reading and to mathematical and scientific literacy (OECD, 2001). It placed more emphasis than most such studies on the *application* of knowledge and skills, and partly perhaps because of this, the UK performed much better than it had in most previous studies of educational performance. Germany, however, to take just one example, performed much worse than it had anticipated, and the PISA study has accordingly been widely publicised there, stimulating a major public debate on the need to reform many traditional features of the German educational system. So OECD can be influential: countries look to it to see how they are doing, and what they need to improve.

OECD's agenda is set by its member countries, so the fact that the Career Guidance Policy Review is taking place is itself significant. OECD has paid some attention to career guidance issues in the past, but mainly as part of examining policy issues relating to initial transitions from school to work (OECD/CERI, 1996; OECD, 2000). This is the first occasion on which it has launched a full formal policy review devoted specifically to guidance issues, and the first occasion on which it has looked at such issues on a lifelong basis. The proposal to carry out the review was endorsed both by OECD's Education Committee and by its Employment, Labour and Social Affairs Committee, and reflects the current policy interest in career guidance from both of these perspectives.

As with other OECD activities, member countries were invited to indicate whether they wished to take part in the review. Fourteen countries chose to do so. Eleven of these are from Europe (Austria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Spain, UK); the others are Australia, Canada and Korea.

The methodology of the review involves a number of stages. First, the participating countries were actively involved in the development of a questionnaire designed to cover the issues in which they were interested. They were then responsible for completing this questionnaire for their own provision. This is being followed by a country visit, of which eleven have been completed so far. In most OECD reviews, such visits are conducted by a team of 4-5 people and take a fortnight or so; in view of the specialist nature of the career guidance review, and the expressed desire of countries for a quicker and cheaper approach, a slimmed-down version is being applied on this occasion, with two-person teams (Richard Sweet or myself from OECD, plus an external expert from another country), and most visits being confined to one week. It is a fascinating, intense process: we read a lot in advance and then have an intensive series of meetings and visits to test our impressions and probe what seem to be the key issues. Our report is then written up in the form of a Country Note, which draws from the questionnaire and other documentary evidence as well as from the visit itself, and includes our analysis together with our suggestions on possible ways forward for the country concerned.

Now that most of this work has been completed, an analytical meeting is being held in Bonn next week at which the participating countries will be invited to reflect on the key issues we have identified from the work to date, including what can be learned from the similarities and differences between their systems and practices. This will lay the basis for the Comparative Report, which will be submitted in draft to the two relevant OECD committees in spring 2003 and then published in summer 2003. Finally, a dissemination conference will be held in early autumn 2003 at which the key findings of the review will be discussed by relevant policy-makers not only from the participating countries but also from other OECD member countries.

In addition to the questionnaire responses, the Country Notes and the Comparative Report, we have commissioned eight papers, in collaboration with the European Commission. Four were completed several months ago: on quality issues; on the skills, training and qualifications of guidance workers; on integrating services at local level; and on the role of ICT in integrated guidance systems. The other four

cover: the role of the market and of governments in guidance delivery; evaluating outcomes; improving career information; and whether information is a sufficient basis for effective career decision-making. All of these documents are being made available, as they are completed, on our review website (www.oecd.org/els/education/careerguidance).

Finally, we are also working on a rationale statement, which will outline the role of career guidance in relation to lifelong learning and to active labour-market and welfare-to-work strategies. We hope to link this to some current OECD work on human capital development. This recognises that in OECD countries about 40% of individual variation in earnings can be explained through conventional measures like years of education, literacy and work experience, combined with the background factors of gender, language background and parents' education. It suggests that at least some of the remaining 60% might be accounted for by motivation and other personal characteristics, including the notion of 'wider human capital' – i.e. people's ability to manage the development and utilisation of their own human capital. These are important arguments, which potentially place career guidance centre-stage.

Some initial general findings

As I have indicated, we have not yet completed our fieldwork for the review and we are at an early stage in drawing its threads together. I am accordingly not in a position to present our conclusions in any definitive form. Whatever I say this morning, therefore, is tentative, and open to review in the light of later analyses and discussions. A number of issues, however, have begun to emerge. I want to start by identifying four general conclusions, and then to discuss briefly twelve more specific ones.

The first general conclusion is that all of the countries taking part in the review are seeking to re-examine their career guidance systems in the context of encouraging lifelong learning and sustained employability for all. The balance between learning objectives, labour market objectives and social equity objectives, and the precise nature of these objectives, varies across the countries. But all recognise the need for lifelong learning strategies to be linked to employability and to be driven significantly by individuals, with potentially significant implications for the role of career guidance services in supporting such processes on a lifelong basis.

The second is that, in all countries, career guidance services are in practice still predominantly concerned with two groups: young people and the unemployed. Their main focus is on helping young people to manage their choices within initial education and their entry to the labour market; and on helping adults who are unemployed to return to work as quickly as possible. The needs of adults who are outside the labour market altogether, or in employment but seeking to change or develop their career, are relatively neglected.

The third is that, particularly in relation to these neglected groups, an important policy issue is the need for career guidance services which go beyond the provision of career information. The *necessity* of making good information available to all is not in question: the Internet is increasingly providing a means of doing so. But the issue is whether this is *sufficient*. For career information to be of value, individuals need to be able to act upon it. This assumes that they are able to find it, understand it, relate it to their needs, and convert it into personal action. We need to know much more about the dynamics of this process, but from what we know at present, it seems likely that the availability of human mediation is crucial. Strategies for providing this mediation, either from skilled career guidance practitioners, or from others supported by such professionals, are accordingly essential.

The fourth general conclusion is that in these terms, no country has yet developed a universal lifelong guidance system capable of supporting a lifelong learning strategy. Across the participating countries, the key elements of such a system can be discerned. If one could take the strengths of each of the countries, and bring them together, a powerful model would begin to emerge. We hope to describe such a model, illuminating each of its key elements with examples of good practice from different countries. But at present no country has enough of the elements in place, or has developed them sufficiently, to claim that it has cracked the problem.

Some initial specific findings

Within the context of these four general conclusions, I now want to focus on a number of more specific issues.

The first is the growing recognition of the importance of career education and guidance in schools not only in helping young people to make the immediate choices that confront them but also in laying the foundations for lifelong learning and lifelong career development. This is evident, for example, in the concept of *l'école orientante* (the guidance-oriented school) in Quebec. It is also evident in the

debates taking place in all countries about how and where to locate career education within the curriculum. At a more concrete level, it is evident in the well-established practice in Austria and Germany of all school students visiting the information centre in the local employment office, so that they know where it is and what it offers.

The second specific issue is the risk of career education and guidance in schools being subsumed and marginalised within broader concepts. This has emerged in two different respects. In Australia, there is a risk that the efforts being made to strengthen the vocational elements within the curriculum and to support young people's transitions from school may paradoxically lead to neglect of the career education and guidance which is crucial to the success of these efforts: a timely reminder that career education is separate from vocational education, and that neither necessarily implies the other. More timely still from a UK perspective is our finding that in Canada, Ireland and Norway, all of which have school counsellors with a holistic role covering personal and social as well as educational and vocational guidance, there is a risk that the pressing nature of pupils' personal and social problems may seriously restrict the time and attention which the counsellors are able or inclined to devote to career guidance matters. In Norway, indeed, the government has accordingly decided to set up a three-year project to separate the two roles by attaching them to different individuals, partly to protect the resourcing of career guidance work, and partly to address its distinctive competence requirements, including keeping in touch with changes in the education system and the labour market. This may have some relevance to the continuing debates about the design of the Personal Adviser role within the Connexions Service in England.

Third, it is evident that in several countries career guidance services in further and higher education are inadequate and stand somewhat apart from other career guidance services. Within the context of lifelong learning, both of these situations seem untenable.

Fourth, there is a widespread need to integrate public employment services more closely into lifelong learning strategies in general and strategies for lifelong access to guidance in particular. Huge public resources are concentrated in these services. They tend at present to be targeted narrowly at particular groups (notably the unemployed) and short-term goals (immediate employment and removal from the benefit system). But they could be transformed into services for all, helping people to sustain their employability and respond flexibly to change. This could also enable their work with the targeted groups to be preventive rather than purely remedial and to avoid the stigma which can undermine the effectiveness of such work. The

German model, in which information centres and (at least in principle) employment counselling services are open to all is probably the nearest available model, though moves in this direction are also evident, for example, in Norway.

Fifth, in relation to provision for employed adults in particular, issues about the relative roles of market-based and of publicly-funded provision. The private sector in most countries, including the UK, is disconnected from the publicly-funded services, with largely separate professional structures: there is a strong case for bringing these structures closer together. The private sector includes services provided internally by employers for their employees, and services purchased on the market. The latter is particularly extensive in Australia, Canada and the Netherlands, pump-primed largely by employers and also by the state which in both of these countries has contracted out a substantial part of its public employment services including some guidance-related services. There is little evidence in any country yet of a substantial market supported by unsubsidised fees paid by individuals themselves. If guidance is a public as well as a private good, the roles of government in relation to a mixed model of provision would seem to be threefold: to stimulate the market; to ensure that it is quality-assured; and to address market failure.

Sixth, within a quasi-market-based approach there would seem to be a particularly important role for the voluntary, community-based sector. In Australia, the largest single supplier of contracted-out public employment services is the Salvation Army. In Canada, it is estimated that there are over 10,000 community-based organisations delivering career development services. There is also interest in a number of countries, including the Netherlands and the UK, in the role of trade unions in providing career guidance services for their members.

Seventh, an area where current provision seems particularly inadequate is in relation to the third age. Many countries are expressing growing concerns about their ageing populations and difficulties in funding adequate pension provision, and the consequent need to encourage people to stay longer in the labour force. But they have not yet addressed the potential role of guidance services in this respect, and in particular in helping individuals to manage more gradual and more flexible approaches to 'retirement'.

Eighth, there is also much scope for using helplines and web-based services to extend access to guidance, and for integrating such services more creatively with face-to-face services. In this connection, the experience of Learndirect in the UK seems potentially of great interest to a number of countries.

Ninth, there is a need for stronger professional structures in the career guidance field. In many countries, the current structures are weak in comparison with those in related professions. Guidance strategies can of course involve delivery through others – teachers and mentors of various kinds, for example. But greater clarity is needed about the role of guidance professionals within such diversified delivery systems. There is also a need for competence frameworks which can embrace but also differentiate a variety of guidance roles – and incidentally provide a career development structure for guidance staff themselves. The Standards and Guidelines for Career Development Practitioners developed in Canada, through a long process of consultation between all the professional groups involved, is of particular interest in this respect.

Tenth, stronger infrastructures are required to build up the evidence base for both policy and practice, and to do so on a cumulative basis so that experience is not wasted and mistakes repeated. This should include evidence on outcomes: this is a further area where the UK experience, especially if it can be marshalled effectively, could be of considerable international interest.

Eleventh, a need is evident in many countries for stronger mechanisms to provide co-ordination and leadership in articulating strategies for lifelong access to guidance. Such mechanisms are required within government, where responsibility for guidance services is often fragmented across a number of ministries and branches. They are also needed more broadly at national level, to bring together the various guidance professional bodies and relevant stakeholder groups. In addition, they are needed at regional and/or local level, closer to the point of delivery. Denmark offers a strong model in these respects, with its Danish Council for Educational and Vocational Guidance (RUE) and its Regional Guidance Committees linked to the structure of Regional Labour Market Councils. So does the UK with its National IAG Board, its Guidance Council, its new Federation of Professional Associations for Guidance Practitioners, and its local IAG partnerships. In some other countries, on the other hand, seminars set up for our review seemed to provide an unusual opportunity for the relevant groups to come together, and led to suggestions that some more sustainable infrastructure was needed to extend these discussions and explore areas of joint action.

Finally, alongside such strategic structures, there is also a need for strategic instruments which can be operationally useful across the whole range of the career guidance field and help to hold it together. Organisational quality standards of the kind developed by the Guidance Council are one; another is competence

frameworks of the kinds developed in Canada and also by CAMPAG in the UK. A third, developed in Canada drawing from earlier work in the USA, is the Blueprint for Life/Work Designs: a list of the competencies which career education and guidance programmes aim to develop among clients at different stages of their lives, with accompanying performance indicators. The systematic publication of data linked to these indicators could provide a way of introducing more coherent accountability across a co-ordinated career guidance system. Together, the three instruments could harmonise the system.

Some comments on the UK

Many of these conclusions apply to the UK as well as to the other participating countries. I cannot at present be much more specific about detailed recommendations relating to the UK because this particular report is still being written, and is Richard Sweet's responsibility rather than mine – part of the deal between us was that he would cover the UK while I would cover Australia (which seemed a good deal to me!). It seems likely from his initial notes, however, that it will include some comments on at least three areas of concern: the risk that the new Connexions Service in England will weaken services for young people outside narrowly targeted groups; the risk that it will weaken lifelong strategies at a time when these need to be strengthened; and the problems attaching to the attempt to base adult guidance strategies on a distinction between 'advice' and 'guidance' which is difficult to operationalise in practice. All of these are mainly English rather than UK-wide issues.

At the same time, however, the report is likely to be very positive about a number of features of UK provision. As I have already suggested, the UK has a number of initiatives and practices that are potentially of wide international relevance. These include the Guidance Council and its quality standards (including the role of the Guidance Accreditation Board), the competence framework developed by CAMPAG, the Learndirect callcentres and their likely closer links with IAG partnerships, university careers services and their links with CSU, the research on learning and economic outcomes, and others besides. We have much to learn from others, but also much from which others might learn. As in many other fields, the UK has a strong tradition of innovation, but a less strong tradition of implementation and dissemination. We too often fail to celebrate our successes. In the field of career guidance we have much of which we can be proud. We need to value it more, and to be more clever – as, for example, the Canadians have been with initiatives like The Real Game – in making it available for use elsewhere. We

also need to recognise that while we still have much to do, we have many strengths on which to build.

Other current international initiatives

I want finally to refer briefly to the links between our OECD review and three other current international initiatives at the interface between career guidance and public policy.

First, the European Commission is currently setting up a European Guidance Forum to provide an opportunity for the key policy-makers in each member-state (plus the aspirant member-states) to share their experience and to consider what initiatives might be appropriate at European level. As part of the preparations for this forum, the Commission has asked CEDEFOP and the European Training Foundation to use our OECD questionnaire in order to collect relevant data on countries which are not taking part in our review. The new Forum is still at a very early stage, but it could fill an important gap within the Commission, encouraging Member-States to review regularly what they can learn from each other and areas where collective action is mutually desirable, including policy lessons from the many valuable and innovative cross-national projects that have taken place under LEONARDO and other action programmes.

Second, the World Bank is about to initiate a parallel review in a number of middle-income countries, again using an adapted version of the OECD questionnaire as the basis for its data collection. I am involved in this project as lead consultant. The countries to be visited are likely to include Chile, the Philippines, Russia, South Africa and Turkey. The review should help to indicate the policy priorities that have to be addressed in countries with limited resources.

Finally, following two very successful international symposia on career development and public policy held in Canada in 1999 (Hiebert & Bezanson, 2000) and 2001, there are some tentative plans to set up a new International Centre for Career Development and Public Policy. This will aim to bring together policy-makers and guidance professional leaders on a regular basis, and to carry out collaborative international research projects in area of mutual concern. The plans are still at an early stage; while it seems possible that the Canadian government will provide some initial core support, complementary support from a couple of other countries is likely to be needed to convert the plans into action.

If these plans come off, it seems that the results of current efforts will be, across OECD, the European Commission and the World Bank, the most extensive harmonised international database we have ever had on guidance policy and practice, plus two major sustainable infrastructures – the European Guidance Forum and the International Centre – for maintaining the dialogue between career development and public policy. Strengthening this dialogue is crucial if lifelong access to career guidance, in support of lifelong career development for all, is to become a reality across the developed world.

References

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